

How to maintain motivation for studying Japanese in Finland?

—Interview with students taking the Japanese language courses Japan 3 and Japan 4 at the University of Helsinki—

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1. Introduction

Motivation is deeply associated with learning environment (Müller & Louw, 2004). The learning environment for students who study the Japanese language at the Department of World Cultures of Helsinki University might make it difficult for students to retain their motivations to continue studying the Japanese language¹: there are not enough opportunities for using the language in Finland and materials for their study are difficult to gain, expensive and limited. Higher-level students especially might confront a challenging situation when it comes to maintaining their motivations, because ‘the market value (Inoue, 2000)’ of their Japanese language ability might be considered low in Finland. For example, the students’ advanced ability to use the Japanese language does not always guarantee rich opportunities for prospective jobs.

Their learning environment at the university is also always problematic; studying of a language in ‘minor’ position (Inoue, 2000)² have been exposed by difficult conditions, such as low budgets for language education (Smedlund, 2012: vii). Participants of the courses are required to complete many tasks within a tight course schedule, and eventually they are expected to conduct a self-study to achieve the goal of the course (Smedlund, 2012: ix). This paper focuses on how students retain their motivations in such a challenging learning environment.

2. Subjects and Methods

I conducted interviews with four students: two from Japan 3, intermediate level (A&B) and two from Japan 4, upper-intermediate and lower-advanced level (C&D). I chose them because they have not had experience studying in Japan for a long time and each has either two majors, another minor or a full-time job. These criteria are based on my assumption that it might be more challenging for students who do not have experience studying in Japan, and have other studies or works besides Japanese language learning to maintain motivation³. Interviews were conducted by Rie Fuse (author),

¹ The Department of World Cultures provided five Japanese language courses in 2015-16: Japan 1 (elementary level), Japan 2 (elementary and intermediate level), Japan 3 (intermediate level), Japan 4 (upper intermediate and lower advanced level) and Japanese conversation (intermediate level).

² Here ‘minor’ position refers to a lower value placed on the study in the institution in which the language learning is conducted. In the case of Finland, languages in ‘major’ position could mean, for example, English, Swedish, and Russian, whereas ones in ‘minor’ position include Japanese, Chinese, and Arabian, etc. Uemura (2012:xv) refers to the term ‘harvinainen kieli’ to describe the position of Japanese language in Finland. I used a quotation mark here because what is minor (and major) could be changeable depending on the context.

³ The combination between Japanese studies and another major or subject by the interviewees is quite interesting because they combine a sort of practical studies with Japanese language learning. This tendency is quite common among other students who participate in Japanese language courses.

who was a responsible teacher of these two courses with Dr. Riikka Länsisalmi in autumn 2015—spring 2016. Interviews were conducted in English.

Interview questions are as follows:

- (1) What is your general goal in learning Japanese language?
- (2) What motivates you to reach your goal?
- (3) What are the challenges to keeping your motivations in general?
- (4) What contents of the course motivate you and do not motivate you?
- (5) What experiences during the course enhance or lessen your motivation?

3. Results

Results of the interviews are summarized in Table1. The answers to Question 1 show that all of the interviewees link their goals for learning the Japanese language with their personal interests. What motivates them to reach the goals is generally emotional, such as knowing that they are improving and being in a challenging situation (Question 2). Interestingly, two students mentioned that setting a challenging goal could by itself be effective motivation; they said they liked being in challenging situations, which made them more motivated. This indicates that my hypothesis that it might be difficult to keep motivation to study Japanese in Finland in such a challenging learning environment is partly wrong; being in a challenging environment itself is one important factor for them to keep motivation⁴. Compared with the factors that enhance motivation, factors that make it difficult are more practical: time limitations, work stress and conducting different tasks at the same time (Question 3). This is actually understandable because all of the students have many tasks besides Japanese learning including other studies and jobs, and this situation can be expected to be common in many of university students in Finland.

The aspects of the course which motivate these students include regulation of learning, getting feedback and homework (Question 4). This indicates that even though all of them have stabilized intrinsic motivation regarding learning Japanese based on their personal interests, they still need additional extrinsic factors to keep motivation; this might be concerned with the difficulty to entirely accomplish self-study. Experience during the course related to motivation is strongly connected with relatedness with others; communication with Japanese assistants and interaction with peers (Question 5). This reflects the importance of motivation of face-to-face meetings during the course to create interaction with other people to maintain their motivations.

⁴ I cannot interpret this that students who like being in a challenging condition choose studying a ‘minor’ language (see Note 2) without additional surveys to clarify this issue.

Table.1 Results of the interviews

Questions	Students			
	A	B	C	D
Motivation to start learning Japanese language	Personal interest	Personal interest	Personal interest and seeking job opportunities	Hoping to study a language which is different from European languages
(1) What is your general goal in learning Japanese language?	Understanding <i>budo</i> (martial arts) better	Unclear	Job opportunities as a translator	Completing the course
(2) What motivates you to reach your goal?	Experience of <i>budo</i> as a hobby; knowing of improvement	Knowing improvement	Challenging condition to study	Setting a challenging goal
(3) What are the challenges to maintain your motivation?	Time limitations	Work stress; balance among different tasks: work, family, study, hobby	Few chances to use the language; time limitations; money issue	Time limitations; balance among different tasks: other studies, work and hobby
(4) What contents of the course motivate and not motivate you ⁵ ?	Regulation of learning; knowing grammar, and vocabulary; productive exercises; homework; getting feedback	Regulation of learning; homework; getting feedback	Regulation of learning; getting feedback; interaction with peers	Regulation of learning; grammar explanation both in Japanese and in Finnish; interesting materials to read offered by teachers
(5) What experiences during the course enhance or lessen your motivation?	Positive: communication with Japanese assistants ⁶ Negative: old style textbook	Positive: communication with Japanese assistants; atmosphere of the class Negative: studying polite form (<i>keigo</i>)	Positive: communication with Japanese assistants Negative: pressure by a teacher	Positive: interaction with peers Negative: communication with students at different levels

4. Discussion

The results of the interviews show that the interviewees utilize the course as a tool to retain their motivation; including regulating learning, getting feedback, conducting assignments, and exercises with peers. As Müller & Palekčić (2005:32) remark, university students retain a stronger stabilization of intrinsic motivation for specific subjects, and in this case, students' motivations seem to be well retained through stabilised intrinsic motivation regarding the subject. The reason for this could be

⁵ It might have been difficult for interviewees to discuss negative aspects of the courses and they might have been aware of the possibility of having emotional effects on me as a teacher responsible for the course. Some of them mentioned negative aspects from their experience at the past courses.

⁶ All of my courses invite Japanese exchange students as assistants.

that the students' subject choices are influenced by their own personal interests (Mikkonen et al., 2009), and 'the motivation remains stable independently from the teaching-learning environment' (Müller & Palekčić, 2005:39). However, they still acknowledge that they need extrinsic motivation, something that leads to a certain outcome in order to regulate their learning and retain motivation. This reflects the discussion by Mikkonen et al. (2009) that extrinsic motives may be complementary to individual interest, forming an optimal basis for university studies. They combine these extrinsic motivations with intrinsic motivations. As a result, they can perform extrinsically motivated actions 'with an attitude of willingness that reflects an inner acceptance of the value or utility of a task' (Ryan & Deci, 2000: 55).

5. Reflection

Results of the interviews suggest it is important for the course to present clear guidelines and instructions regarding course contents, schedule, assignments, feedback, and assessment, which help to enhance students' competences. At the same time, there should be awareness that deadlines, directives and competition might be easily transferred into threat in a challenging learning environment, because people experience them as controllers of their behavior (Ryan and Deci 2000, 59). Interviewee D referred to the pressure of having many deadlines because she has two majors and one minor. Students will more likely adopt and internalise a goal if they understand it and have the relevant skills to succeed at it. Offering optimal challenges and effective relevant feedback is also important. If boring tasks and activities are continued, students may suffer from stress-related effects on their motivations (Mikkonen et al., 2009: 232). Thus the relevance of tasks and activities must necessarily be presented during the courses.

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